



SEXIST DISCOURSE ON TWITTER - THE CASE OF FEMALE LEADING ROLES IN STAR WARS ROGUE ONE

DISCURSO SEXISTA NO TWITTER - O CASO DE PROTAGONISTAS FEMININAS EM *STAR WARS ROGUE ONE*

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Abstract: The aim of this article was to analyse comments reproduced in social media Twitter when Star Wars - Rogue One trailer was released in 2016. The selected comments refer to the main movie character, Jyn Erso. The results point that users reproduce sexist discourse as a symbolic violence (BOURDIEU, 2018) by identifying (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008) and evaluating (FAIRCLOUGH) through the actress physical appearance.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis. Sexist discourse. New media communication. Twitter.

Resumo: Este artigo objetiva analisar comentários reproduzidos na rede social Twitter quando o trailer de Star Wars - Rogue one foi lançado em 2016. Os comentários coletados fazem referência a personagem principal da película, Jyn Erso. Os resultados apontam que, ao identificar (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008) e avaliar (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003) a personagem de acordo com suas características físicas, os usuários do Twitter constituem violência simbólica (BOURDIEU, 2018) e reproduziram um discurso sexista em relação a personagem principal do filme.

Palavras-chave: Análise crítica de discurso. Discurso sexista. Novas mídias comunicativas. Twitter.

1. Introduction

Online new media is one of the most recent ways of communication. It is used to spread news faster, connect people via social media, promote politicians and so on. However, ethical and social behavior issues have been raised especially regarding the production of fake news, the excessive use of social media and games, virtual crimes, hate speech and discriminatory discourses. This is the case of Twitter.

A recent article from The New York Times³, for instance, shows that posts produced by Twitter users containing some type of discriminatory discourse have been increasing since 2016. In this scenario,

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³For more information, check: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/16/technology/twitter-adds-new-ways-to-curb-abuse-and-hate-speech.html>

the (re)production of sexist discourse against women in leading roles in films such as Stars Wars⁴ is not an exception. Star Wars installments are being produced for more than 40 years. This production impacts thousands of people, leading them to watch their movies in cinema and, as a consequence, the film has a huge influence on kids, guiding them to buy toys, inspiring adults to produce cartoons, comic books and books about the universe created by George Lucas⁵. When Rogue One trailer was released, websites dragged attention to sexist comments made about the new protagonist. Regarding the protagonists it was not the first time that a similar event happened. When the previous movie trailer, The force awakens, was released, some sexist insults were noticed in websites. As it seemed a current situation, the problematization of those sexist discourses encouraged me to develop this research.

Sexist discourse in those platforms results in more segregation between men and women. Hence, the investigation of this issue contributes to the development of a more democratic, inclusive and respectful society as well as healthier interactions among users in this new public sphere.

The main purpose of this research article is to analyze how women are represented in sexist discourses reproduced on Twitter. Specifically, I want to identify and interpret what types of statements are produced about women in those tweets as they seem to be the main linguistic and discursive device used by social actors in this type of discriminatory discourse.

The nature of this research is qualitative. Thus, we collected 12 tweets in the following websites: junkee.com (1 tweet), refinery29.com (2 tweets), sheknows.com (2 tweets) pajiba.com (2 tweets), twitter.com (3 tweets), konbini.com (1 tweet), salon.com (1 tweet). The comments were made in April 7th, 2016 when the Star Wars Rogue One trailer was released. First, we identified and categorized the types of statements used to produce sexist discourse. Then, an analysis of the main linguistic-discursive devices was made in order to interpret the statements and the process of meaning-making. Lastly, the results found in the analysis were presented.

In an attempt to contribute to such a discussion, this article unfolds as follows: First, we discuss the theoretical framework that informs this study in which the following notions are presented: discourse and sexist discourse, gender, and genre, explaining what constitutes a tweet. Then, by way of example,

⁴The first movie, A new hope, released in 1977 started the franchise that lasts more than 40 years. A new hope was supposed to be only one movie but due to the huge success the director decided to produce two more, developing the first trilogy. Later, in 1999's deciding to explore even more the universe, a trilogy of *prequels* (movies that present a previous story) started and was finished in 2005. After 10 years, a trilogy of *sequels* (movies that present the sequence of a story) started to be produced and in will be finished in 2019. Besides being part of the same universe Rogue one is a solo movie, it does not depend on the others films' story to be understood. According to Belletini and Hata (1162), the public identification with the instalment is what maintain the production of the saga.

⁵ The main writer of the first Star Wars movie. For more information, check: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000184/>

we illustrate and discuss in the analysis the data collected. Lastly, the results based on the analysis are presented, followed by some concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical framework

In this section I will discuss the notion of discourse and its features that contribute to reproduce sexist discourse as a gendered outcome. To better understand sexist discourse, the notion of gender and social behavior are also presented in this section followed by the discussion about tweets.

2.1 The notion of Discourse

Discourses are formed by the choice of elements during the production of a text. Those choices show, through the use of language, what users truly believe, according to certain world views, values and beliefs. According to Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 6) discourses can be described as “social cognitions, socially specific ways of knowing social practices, they can be, and are used as resources for representing social practices in texts.” In the same view, Brunner and Graefen (*apud* Wodak, 2001, p. 5) state that discourse is understood by its “units and forms of speech, of interaction, which can be part of everyday linguistic behavior, but can equally appear in an institutional sphere.” In other words, discourse is the participation of social actors and how they use linguistic discursive features in social practices. Discourses can be accomplished by a group of individuals, institutions or one social actor and may influence an entire nation or a specific part of the society. As Fairclough (2003, p. 3) states discourses can be national, regional, local or gendered outcome about a theme, public opinion, social practices and so forth.

In social practices there are socially accepted and ratified roles for women and men. For example: if a woman identifies herself as a woman, she is expected to play a role and/or be feminine according to the notion of femininity established by the society. This is referred by Ochs (1993, p. 288) as self and other attribution. Both concepts are built upon several factors that surround the social actors' life, such as: gender (male, female, non-binary), religion (catholic, protestant), social roles (mother, father, daughter), relationships (professional, educational, parenthood) and so on. In other words, the attribution process is developed according to each segment of the individuals' social life and how they relate to the social world. According to the author, self-attribution is related to how individuals build their own identity, how they behave in society whereas other attribution refers to how social actors attribute other individuals in the world, develop relationships, express feelings and especially to the purpose of this research, how they evaluate social actors.

In the course of social practices the choice of linguistic-discursive features is crucial to social actors attribute identities. Depending on the social actor's point of view, other attribution can be positive or negative in terms of what is desirable or undesirable, acceptable or unacceptable. That is when sexist discourse may happen. Online Cambridge Dictionary⁶, defines sexism as “(actions based on) the belief that the members of one sex are less intelligent, able, skilful, etc. than the members of the other sex”. In this view, I understand sexist discourse as a gendered outcome produced by social actors when attribute others according to the roles performed in the society. Specifically in this research sexist discourse was reproduced on how social actors show disapproval for having women taking traditional masculine places in leading groups, as Star Wars Rogue One narrative. Regarding to gender, its notion will be discussed later in this section.

To better comprehend how sexist discourse is (re)produced I rely on Fairclough's (2003, p. 109) concepts of statements. According to the author, statements are social actors' construction made in order to express ideas. Statements can be classified in three types: *realis* (when social actors attest reality), *irrealis* (when people try to guess something or even create a possibility of an action) and evaluations (when people are analysed and categorized according to the worldviews, values and beliefs socially accepted by social actors).

Regarding evaluations, Fairclough (2003, p. 173) subdivide them as affective mental processes and assumed values, and both are made according to what text producers believe, pursue as values and their affectional relation to the topic discussed. Affective mental processes happen when text producers talk passionately about a theme, and this passion can be considered as good (positive) or bad (negative). In our *corpus*, Twitter users' comments such as *looks crap, I just don't know how to feel about another female lead* shows a negative passionate way to refer to women in leading roles in films. Assumed values are the values social actors take as true for their lives according to what is socially accepted. One example is when a user disagrees that having a woman as a main character saying that is **feminist bullshit**.

Furthermore, according to Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 25), there are subcategories, such as functionalization and identification (pp. 42-45) that help us to understand how sexist discourse is reproduced. Functionalization is related to the role people in society perform and/or their function in the world, for example: assistant, leaders, presidents, players and so on. Identification is related to historical, social, institutional and place of origin. It is subdivided in classification (related to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion etc), relational identification (in which are presented parenthood relationships, work roles and so on), and physical identification (classification via characteristics of the

⁶ For more information, check: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sexism>

body). Reisigl and Wodak (pp. 47-53) reorganize these categories as follows: functionalization becomes actionalisation (according to the actions and roles people play in social practices); relational identification becomes relationalisation (personal relations social actors build in their social lives) and physical identification is redefined as somatisation (according to physical appearance). The authors also use the concept of originalisation (according to the place of origin). These subcategories seem to be relevant as our data analysis will show.

2.2 The notion of gender

In this paper, the notion of gender is helpful to understand what constitutes sexist discourse. Gender is intrinsically connected to sexism because social actors attribute to others their own values based on sex/gender differences.

For many years, it was believed that the definitions of sex and gender were the same, but during the 1970's linguistic scholars started to disrupt both concepts showing differences between them. Butler was one of the pioneers in those studies. She claims that gender is “accomplished within a regulatory frame” (*apud* Tannen and Kendall, 2001, p. 649). In other words, there are several social behaviour reproduced by social actors to achieve their masculinity or femininity, according to what is socially accepted. For example, if a woman does not take care of her physical appearance she is not considered to be feminine.

In this view, Wodak (1997, p. 698) argues that gender is

related to and overlaps with the sociocultural and ethnic background of the interlocutors, with their age, their level of education, their socioeconomic status, their emotions, and the specific power dynamics of the discourse investigated.

Consequently, gender cannot be accomplished only by the individual because there are several external factors that contribute to gender identity.

According to West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 127), three different categories and their meanings are fundamental to better understand gender, that are sex, sex category and gender. Thus, sex is predetermined when the embryo is fertilized, before birth, and it becomes male or female. The individual does not have control of it. Sex category is the social recognition to what type of genitalia the living person owns; it is socially agreed as woman or man, and it does not depend on the individuals' wishes. According to the authors (p. 130) gender “is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category. Gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category”. Subjoining the definition Butler

proposes, West and Zimmerman state that gender identification depends on the relationship men and women constitute with the social world.

Gender identification is based on the interaction of the social actor with the world. It means that, for instance, the types of clothes men and women wear express their behaviour in social practices. This type of expression constitutes part of our social identities, as pointed out by Bourdieu (2018, p. 17)

The way men are usually seen or act according to the rules socially established, shows how power is concentrated on them. This is named by Bourdieu as *habitus* (2018, p. 30). This is even more complex when men and women with such a view strongly believe men are able to handle and control any context of social life to the detriment of women. This means that when women take places or perform roles traditionally attributed to men it can be considered offensive. As a result, several types of violence can be reproduced against women. One of those is symbolic violence, that is, according to the author (2018, p. 3), “imperceptible and invisible even to its victims exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling”. In other words, even though symbolic violence seems invisible to the victims, it may affect their social lives. One example can be seen in the following tweet: **Imagine a future in which a Star Wars movie has a male protagonist. Go ahead, imagine it. You’re not going to get one.** The tentative to exclude women in leading roles represents men’s dissatisfaction when they are not represented in a leading role.

Symbolic violence happens as a result of an asymmetric power relation socially built between genders. As Bourdieu states (2018, p. 72), men are usually represented in exotic places and they are in charge of the situation whereas women are depicted in domestic places/jobs, such as taking care of the children or the house. In the case of the previous Star Wars installments (1977’s) men were represented as adventurous heroes, powerful leaders, people who were defending their rights (see the characters of Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, Han Solo etc.) whereas women were underrepresented, one example is Leia. Although she is a strong character she does not perform a leading role. In the installment she follows the male heroes instructions, even though she is a leader of the resistance. The character is treated according to her title, a princess, indicating that she is delicate and should not be in a war. These roles changed dramatically and women were more visible in the new installments of the saga (see the 2015’s *The force awakens* and 2016’s *Rogue One*) when two women are represented as visible strong leaders (see Rey and Jyn Erso) after nearly 40 years of the saga. As a result, men start complaining about women leadership as can be seen in the following tweet passage: **another white anorexic British girl leads a Star Wars picture.**

Such a change in the sex/genre of the main characters in the *franchise* reflects the very same social changes that happened in society. Women through feminist movements are demanding to be well characterized in order to represent their social achievements in real life.

2.3 The notion of genre

As our needs of communication change, new genres will be created. This is the case of tweets. According to Fairclough (2003, p. 66), genre is considered as linguistic ways individuals use to exchange information. This means that when communication happens, social actors interact differently within social practices through different genres. This is why social practices and their discursive and non-discursive elements (actions, activities, genres, social actors, and so forth) are the *loci* for ideological struggle over power.

The Internet is one of the social platforms that allow new genres to happen. As Marcuschi states (2004, p. 27), cyberspace promotes new interactions among users. And new technologies of communication (such as email, online news, social media, microblogging etc.) allow genre modification with various (new) semiotic means thereby contributing to the promotion of a more dynamic space.

Interaction via social media is the users' contribution to the development of the new genres. According to Lemos (2008, p. 656), interaction is participation among users, their contribution to produce texts, and in socio discursive practices, interaction is embedded of social power. This way, according to Zhang (*apud* Zappavigna, 2012, p. 170) the use of social media contributes to spread political opinion among users. One example is when public opinion about a specific theme, such as Star Wars movies, causes fuss, as The Wall Street Journal reads: "Rogue One puts Twitter Back in the Mood for Star Wars".

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Twitter is one of the new social media that promotes interaction among users. Created in 2006, it is characterized as a type of micro blog in which users produce posts talking about themes they want using 280⁸ characters (ZAPPAVIGNA, 2012, p. 3). These posts are called tweets and they are a new form of self-expression and social interaction, an emerging genre as Marcuschi (2004, p. 27) proposes. Tweets have their own format and some of the resources used are: hashtags, represented by the symbol # and followed by the topic discussed among the users (eg. "#RogueOne"); emoticons, that are semiotic representations of facial expression to demonstrate feelings (eg. "☺"); non-standard orthography (eg. "okay"); capitalized texts to overstate what is being said (eg. "why is there 'ANOTHER' female

⁷For more information, check: <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2016/04/12/rogue-one-trailer-puts-twitter-back-in-the-mood-for-star-wars/>

⁸ According to BBC news, this number increased in 2017. When Zappavigna's book was released, the users could use up to 140 characters.

lead”); *abridged posts* (eg. “execs” for executives); abbreviations or acronyms (eg. “WTF” for ‘What the Fuck’); the date the tweet was produced; the button follow so that the user can follow other users and see their posts; the name of the user; and also the symbol @ that is unique and it is how the user login in their account on Twitter. An example with some of those aspects can be seen below:

Eg. 1⁹



Source: Twitter

As can be seen, genres are flexible and adaptable to social practices created by text producers. A tweet is a good example of an emerging genre. The features used to construct tweets, such as the use of several semiotic aspects, the choice of what type of language is used are the main tools used to develop and improve pre existing genres. In other words, users are responsible for the development of emerging genres.

3. Findings and discussion

In this section I will present the data analysis with the main findings on sexist discourse reproduced on Twitter in the context of the public discussion of Star Wars - Rogue One’s leading actress.

Eg. 2:



Source: She Knows

⁹ In the tweet the button “follow” can be found as “seguir” (portuguese language)

Sample 2 shows how the user is expressing his feelings/thoughts about having a woman as the main actress, which characterizes an evaluative statement. Firstly, he affirms that he does not have anything to complain about women using **Nothing against women at all**. Secondly, the use of the conjunction **but** indicates that the whole idea presented firstly is in opposition to what follows: **but why is there ANOTHER female lead**. The determiner **another** is used to overstate that one female leader is enough, and he overstates its meaning by capitalizing the determiner. Then, the user refers to the actress as **female lead** categorising her according to her gender using the adjective **female**, and he activates her accordingly to the role she performs through the use of the noun **lead**. At the end of the tweet, he mentions that he does not understand why the necessity for the politically correct (PC¹⁰, as he puts) situation when he affirms **I don't get the need for this PC**. Meaning that, for him, having a woman as main leader is totally unacceptable. The whole tweet shows how the user evaluates the actress according to his values.

Eg. 3:



Source: Salon

In sample 3 the user evaluates the movie protagonist. Starting with the exclamation marker **Ohhhh** the social actor pretends to be surprised about the situation. Then, he uses the determiner **another** to indicate that one woman protagonist is enough in Star Wars instalments. Later, the text producer builds the passage **white anorexic British girl** using the adjectives **white** to qualify her based on skin color, **anorexic** used to attribute her as extremely thin and **British** because of her place of origin, whereas the noun **girl** is used to refer to the actress according to her gender. At the end of the tweet, he evaluates, ironically, the whole situation as **Exciting stuff** meaning that, for him, a woman leading a Star Wars

¹⁰In this paper Urban Dictionary will be used to define the expressions presented by the Twitter users. PC means Politically correct, for more information check: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=pc>

movie is unacceptable. This evaluation is made through the adjective **exciting** used to categorise **stuff**, noun that he uses to resume the whole situation presented by him previously.

Eg. 4:



Source: Konbini

In the fourth example the user seems extremely upset. Firstly he starts questioning what is happening with the movie using, presenting the passage **WTF¹¹ is up with Rogue One then he completes another WOMAN as a lead actor?** using the determiner **another** meaning that the previous leading actress was enough. Then he uses the adverb **as** to qualifies **woman as lead actor**, meaning that the movie should not have a female lead. The noun **woman** is capitalized to overstate its meaning, reinforcing the user thoughts/feelings. Secondly, he questions **Why are they forcing SJW¹² bullshit down our throats?** expressing that he does not share the values presented in the movie. This information happens through the use of the phrasal verb **forcing down** that means, for this user, that Star Wars producers are obligating the fans to share the Social Justice Warrior (SJW as he puts) values. The expression **SJW** used by the text producer means that he does not want a person representing social engagements, in our case, representation of women in leading positions. This is evaluated through the noun **bullshit**. The whole tweet represents that the user considers having a female lead totally inadmissible.

Those were the evaluative statements and their features used to promote sexist discourse on Twitter. Those three examples analyzed are very representative in relation to the amount of tweets collected. Most of the tweets observed present similar constructions to the ones analyzed. The analysis shows that 9 out of 12 samples are evaluative statements. The main linguistic-discursive features found on tweets were gender classification strategy that occurred in 8 out of 9 examples, followed by

¹¹Check: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=wtf>

¹²Check: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=SJW>

actionalisation strategy that appeared in 7 out of 9 tweets, the use of the determiner *another* occurred in 7 out of 9 evaluative statements, somatisation strategy was used by 3 out of 9 users and lastly originalisation appeared in 1 out of 9 evaluative statements.

Now, *irrealis* statements will be discussed.

Eg. 5:



Source: Konbini

Example 5 presents a *irrealis* statement through the hypothetical situation created by the user. The passage **Imagine a future in which a ‘Star Wars movie has a male protagonist** invites the reader to create a future with a man in a leading role, this is done by him through the use of the verb **imagine**. Then, the text producer develops a dichotomy of gender when he refers to **male protagonist** using the adjective **male** to categorise him according to the gender and the noun **protagonist** referring to the role his hypothetical protagonist would perform. Later, he pushes the reader to really create the possibility of a Star Wars movie being starred by a man saying **Go ahead, imagine it**. Lastly, the user frustrates the reader through the passage **You’re not going to get one**. In this whole construction the text producer means that both men and women cannot coexist as protagonists and, as a consequence, having a female leader in Star Wars movies, for him, is inadmissible.

Eg. 6:



Source: Salon

In the sixth example the user hypothesizes that the next Star Wars instalments are going to have only women in leading positions. This is constructed by the author in the first passage **I guess every Star Wars will have a female lead now** through the use of the verb **guess** that indicates his speculations about the future movies and by the modal **will** in the passage **even Han Solo will be** that means his predictions to the future installments. Still in the first passage he uses the determiner **every** to represent that in all Star Wars future movies there will be a leading woman. Then, the user refers to the type of leader in the movie through **female lead** categorising her according to gender using the adjective **female** and activating her accordingly to role she performs in the movie using the noun **lead**. The use of the adverb of time **now** can be understood as the expression **from now on**. Later the text producer says **even Han solo will be a woman in his movie** creating the possibility through the modal **will** that Han Solo, a man protagonist, will be turned into a woman. The passage still means that is a positive fact having man in a leading role but that is inadmissible having a female leader. This is proved through the use of the adverb that intensifies Han solo, **even**. The whole tweet express the user frustration for having a leading woman in the movie.

Those examples show how *irrealis* statements and their discursive features work to reproduce sexist discourse. *Irrealis* statements were found in 2 out of 12 samples analyzed and present a dichotomy created by the users, agreeing and predicting that both male and female protagonists cannot be presented as main leaders at the same time.

Eg. 7:



Source: Salon

Example 7 is a less recurrent data found in the analysis. The user constructs both *irrealis* and evaluative statements. The first passage **The protagonist of #RogueOne is what Disney execs think the young female audience wants** constitutes a *irrealis* statement. Firstly, the user refers to the actress as *protagonist* activating her according to the role she performs in the movie, then he uses the preposition *of* indicating which movie she is a protagonist, in that case, Rogue One represented by the semiotic aspect

#. Secondly, the user hypothesizes what the Disney¹³ executives (**execs**¹⁴ as he puts) believe that the audience is **young** and **female** as he qualifies according to age and gender. This is marked by the verb **wants**. In the second passage **That's a whole new level of insulting** the user evaluates the hypothetical situation as **whole new level of insulting** using the adjectives **whole** to give emphasis, **new** to express that is way of **insulting** is innovative and offensive.

The previous analysis presents that 1 Twitter user produced both *irrealis* and evaluative statements (re)producing sexist discourse. In this example, the user creates a hypothetical situation and then he evaluates the situation created by himself.

The whole analysis presents that all the 12 Twitter users were dissatisfied for having a woman in a leading role, producing both evaluative and *irrealis* statements. This means that sexist discourse arises from men's unacceptance for having a woman in a leading position. This proves that when men are taken from their traditionally leading positions they insult the main actress in order to express their frustration.

4. Conclusion

As can be seen by our data analysis, Twitter can be one more tool to reproduce sexism. In order to promote a more democratic way of interaction the problematization of this type of discourse is extremely important. Tweets have a huge impact on user's opinion and when Twitter users (re)produce sexist discourse they are affecting social actor's lives.

The main aim of this research was to understand how sexist discourse is developed by Twitter users. As a main finding of the analysis, sexist discourse is a gendered outcome (re)produced by text producers in order to criticize Star Wars installments and insult the main actress. Their evaluations pass through the values they pursue and their affectional relations built by the users in relation to the movie.

The analysis proves that those Twitter users are not used to see women in roles they have not performed until recently. It also shows us that men use forms of categorisation strategies presented in the analysis to represent women in a negative way. There are further readings that may improve this research, such as: referential strategies to nominate the actress women, affective mental process and assumed values in sexist discourse and sexist discourse as a type of hate speech.

Given those points, it is important to understand Twitter users are active social actors in socio discursive practices. It means that the choices we make when using language shows our worldviews,

¹³Disney the company which owns Star Wars copyrights. For more info, check: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-20146942>

¹⁴Check <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Exec>

values and beliefs. Therefore, I come to the conclusion that the choice of discursive elements presents how discourse is built and influenced by our values.

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